
Implementation of the United Nations Program of Action for Small Arms and Light Weapons

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[The following are excerpts from the speech delivered to the First Biennial Meeting of the States, concerning the United Nations Program of Action, New York, New York, July 7, 2003.]

Madam Chairperson, Excellencies, and distinguished colleagues, it is my honor and privilege to present the United States report to the First Biennial Meeting of States. All of the governments represented in this hall, and many of you personally, were here two years ago, in July of 2001, when the Program of Action was debated at length and ultimately agreed. In the intervening two years, many governments have exerted considerable efforts, and expended substantial resources, to fulfill the promise of the Program of Action. On behalf of my government, I salute your efforts and look forward to receiving your reports.

The United States strongly supports the United Nations Program of Action, and the meeting for which we are now gathered. We are committed to supporting the very focused and constructive agenda that our Chairperson, Ambassador Inoguchi, has so ably brought forward.

I well recall that our deliberations two years ago were accompanied by many passionate and well-informed advocates just beyond these walls, representing the non-governmental sector. Among them were private citizens representing a wide spectrum of positions relating to the lawful ownership of firearms. Regardless of one's personal views on that issue, in the U.S. or any other country, the U.N. Conference had a very specific mandate from the General Assembly, and lawful gun ownership was not part of that mandate. The scope of the Conference and the Program of Action concern the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons. That remains our focus today.

Madam Chairperson, as we review the many initiatives our governments have pursued under the Program of Action, I submit that we all have more than enough worthy work to do within the terms of that mandate. For it is difficult to exaggerate the impact of illicit flows of small arms and light weapons, in troubled places very distant from this hall.

We often talk about the biggest threats to international peace and security, such as terrorism and weapons of mass destruction and appropriately so. Yet, it is readily apparent that the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons poses a serious threat to stability and security in this hemisphere as well as parts of Africa, South Asia, the Middle East, and elsewhere. The ready availability of lethal weapons of war in the wrong hands is a serious impediment to conflict mediation, and a force protection concern for our militaries, including peacekeepers.

We must all work even more energetically to curb the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons. I sincerely hope one key outcome of our endeavors this week will be a redoubled commitment to that task. And you will find the United States ready to engage in very practical ways to reduce the terrible costs being exacted by these illicit weapons of local destruction.

The United States maintains laws, policies, and programs that support the Program of Action. At the national level, the U.S. has a robust and transparent system of laws and regulations governing national holdings, manufacture, and the international movement of small arms and light weapons. All firearms, by law, are marked at the time of manufacture and import. Inventories of all national military holdings of small arms and light weapons are subject to strict security controls and registration by serial number to ensure that they are not lost or stolen.

At the regional and global levels, since July 2001, the United States has sponsored resolutions in the Organization of American States (OAS) to destroy excess small arms and light weapons and to develop model arms brokering regulations for the Western Hemisphere. We have sought to include small arms and light weapons in the Wassenaar Arrangement arms reporting categories.

We have supported the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe efforts to develop “Best Practice” guides to assist states in establishing effective controls over small arms and light weapons, and made similar efforts elsewhere.

U.S. assistance programs called for in the Program of Action are extensive. Our law enforcement training programs include a focused curriculum on illicit arms trafficking for the countries of Southern Africa. Export control and border security programs in over thirty countries worldwide provide legal assistance, training, and equipment to prevent the illicit traffic in dangerous goods, including small arms and light weapons.

Perhaps our most significant contribution under the program has been in the area of destruction assistance programs. Since early 2001, U.S.-supported programs in ten countries have resulted in the destruction of over 400,000 excess or illegal small arms and light weapons and 44 million rounds of ammunition. The vast majority of these weapons in the global illicit trade are not newly-manufactured but rather are left over from the Cold War, when large weapons stockpiles were common in many countries within the Communist world. Destruction of these weapons, therefore, represents progress it takes them out of circulation for good, where they will never fall into the hands of terrorists, criminals, or warlords, or kill innocent civilians. For details I invite you to refer to our national report, which has been submitted to the United Nations Department for Disarmament Affairs and is available on its website.

Finally today, Madam Chairperson, permit me to offer a word of encouragement to those countries in regions most negatively affected by the illicit small arms and light weapons trade. The U.S. appreciates the connection of this issue to your vital security interests, and urges your delegations to participate fully in the dialogue this week and report candidly on the state of your efforts to implement the Program of Action. Your progress is what will make our work meaningful.

Achieving that progress, in our view, will require addressing many factors underlying the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons worldwide. This activity persists because of lax enforcement of laws and regulations, or their absence altogether. It occurs because of poor governance and an environment that tolerates illegal commerce, often involving corruption among government officials. These are symptoms of a wider pathology undermining stability in parts of the developing world, and until we mount a sufficient collective effort to address the contributing factors comprehensively, we are likely to face challenges from the illicit small arms and light weapons trade. That is why the United States stands ready to be your partner in this important endeavor.